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Reconstructing the Marginal Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*

Dr. Gurpreet Kour

Lecturer in English, GCW Gandhinagar, Jammu.

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Abstract

Homi Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* takes up the issues of nation and national identity and acknowledges the fact that there are people in the world yet to find a sense of belonging to nation and also those who seek voice to state their experiences as humans. Such studies reinstate the fundamental principle that man is and must be seen as a reasonable and moral being before being labeled as using this or that language, belonging to one or another race, rooted in such or such culture since above every other culture there is human culture that we all equally inhabit.

Amitav Ghosh is an anthropologist and an active member of the subaltern studies movement. *In An Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh traces the experiences of Amitab, a young Indian anthropologist from Oxford, conducting ethnographic fieldwork in an Egyptian village and it also incorporates the story of a 12th century Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave. The primary concerns of subaltern studies and post-colonial theory emerge naturally from Ghosh's narrative: he articulates the strained relationship between Egypt and India which, although very different countries, share a history of colonial violence and a desire for modernization.

Amitav Ghosh's narrative dictates the story of the traditionally marginalized and especially the obscure masses who have vanished unknown and unidentified by the world but Ben Yiju's slave is an exception to this only because of the letters of his friends that mentioned Bomma's name otherwise he too would have faced the same plight as of the other nameless masses. Those letters found in the form of documents in a medieval Egyptian Synagogue only have enabled Ghosh to put together to reconstruct and voice the life of Bomma by guessing his religion, birthplace and his experiences of life.

Amitav Ghosh insists that the only way to leave your mark on history is by writing it down and through the story of Bomma, he tries to put forward the idea that there is a necessity to invent sufficient methods for reconstructing the more human and individual experiences of those categorized as illiterate, inconsequential of the marginalized people.

Keywords: *Subaltern, marginalized, obscure, reconstruct, inconsequential.*

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The Fourth World: An Indian Reality by George Manuel deals with all aspects of the lives of indigenous people who are struggling for self-determination and identity. The term Fourth World has often been used to define any community or a section of the society that is marginalized economically and politically. Manuel suggests that once the Fourth World enters the historical consciousness of the globe, it brings the most dramatic change in the historical formation of the social set up leading to transculturation and shaping the post-Columbian world in all its cultural offshoots.

It is an interesting preoccupation to study the process of identity formation and the ways in which identities are shaped through different social and cultural contexts. There are intricate patterns in which identities are actually bound depending upon the social systems and various ideological structures which influence the thoughts and beliefs of human beings and their interactions within the communities and the different sections of the society. Generally, an identity is all about who we are but it is not something intimately personal, identities are socially constructed and are determined by social, political, cultural and economic contexts. Focusing on those

marginal identities of the fourth world, what comes out to be the crux of the study of this whole process of identity formation is that as a result of inequalities of power and authority, there are certain repressive or submissive identities that are formed. Thus the state of powerlessness, economic bankruptcy, low status quo and the domination or exploitation in some cases makes the marginalized groups repressive and the less privileged.

Through illustration and exploration of the literary sources of the natives or the indigenous people of the fourth world, a methodological survey or comprehension can be achieved of the otherwise inaccessible sphere of literature structured in a certain way which is actually quite wanting to be robbed of the controlled manifestation through political strategies and the historical agencies. This can be achieved through understanding the sources of historical memory recorded through verbal and visual languages which is capable of offering a clarification of various traditions that have barred the actual understanding of issues relating to the oppressed and marginalized sections in a society or in any nation. Such survey or study that incorporates social and literary identities of the deprived sections of a society becomes really important to make the Fourth World concept a broader and complete phenomenon.

Amitav Ghosh (July 11, 1956) is the author of notable works like *In An Antique land*, *Sea of Poppies*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*. He is the Indian-born writer whose ambitious novels use complex narrative strategies to probe the nature of national and personal identity, particularly of the people of India and Southeast Asia. Amitav Ghosh is a master of impressionistic technique as his aim while writing his novels is of showing rather than just telling. Ghosh has been able to move freely in his writing between anthropology, history and fiction and has incorporated various techniques and styles in his works. He once said to Friedrich Noranah talking about his writing:

I really don't plot a novel. I just start with an idea I find interesting or a character and then I give myself plenty of loose threads that I don't cut off, so I can pick them up again later as part of the story, if it suits. Sometimes the threads resolve themselves into the narrative and sometimes they just remain loose ends. It's a mystery really, how the story evolves. (Ghosh)

In an *Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh traces the experiences of Amitab, a young Indian anthropologist from Oxford, conducting ethnographic fieldwork in an Egyptian village and it also incorporates the story of a 12th century Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave. Ben Yiju, a Jew lived in Egypt for many years before he hired Bomma, his slave who acted as business assistant as well for him.

Amitav Ghosh is an anthropologist and an active member of the subaltern studies movement. His book reflects the postcolonial theory of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, but in much more creative format. The primary concerns of subaltern studies and post-colonial theory emerge naturally from Ghosh's narrative; he articulates the strained relationship between Egypt and India which, although are very different countries, share a history of colonial violence and a desire for modernization.

Edward Said has been an upright and honest intellectual and has lavished the literary world with his thought provoking ideas and statements. He has always been open in imparting information whether powerful or conventional and has advised the fellow intellectuals to do the same even if their whole being is at stake on critical sense. According to Said, intellectuals should always be with oppressed, marginalized, weak and unrepresented members of a society and must choose means to reach to those elements in whichever way.

In Culture and Imperialism, Said notes that the effect of reading dominant narratives in literature or history is that the marginalized narrative does not simply get added on to the existing dominant one to create a fuller or better picture. Rather, the contrapuntal reading calls into question the assumptions and values of the dominant, hegemonic narrative. (Byrne, *Homi K. Bhabha* 63)

Homi Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* takes up the issues of nation and national identity and acknowledges the fact that there are people in the world yet to find a sense of belonging to nation and also those who seek voice to state their experiences as humans. Such studies reinstate the fundamental principle that man is and must be seen as a reasonable and moral being before being labeled as using this language or that, belonging to one race or another, rooted in such or such culture since above every other culture there is human culture that we all equally inhabit.

Amitav Ghosh's narrative dictates the story of the traditionally marginalized and especially the obscure masses who have vanished unknown and unidentified by the world but Ben Yiju's slave is an exception to this only because of his friends who mentioned his name in the manuscripts otherwise he too would have faced the same plight of the other nameless masses. Those letters found in the form of documents in medieval Egyptian synagogue only have enabled Ghosh to put together to reconstruct and voice the life of Bomma by making attempts to find out his religion, his birthplace and state the experiences of his life. To Amitab, it appears to be a miracle to find reference to Ben Yiju's slave which reflects the attitude that has been adopted towards the people who are less privileged or economically oppressed. He writes in the novel:

But the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priest – the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of that company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. (7)

The manuscripts that Amitab works on were of “[m]any different kinds and only a small portion of them had a religious content, properly speaking” (11). The manuscripts were preserved and handed over to the university library and were grouped together as the Taylor-Schechter collection. “It is in this collection, spread over a few dozen documents, that the stories of Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave are preserved – tiny threads, woven into the borders of a gigantic tapestry” (11).

One is supposed to overcome all barriers, be it of religion, culture, status or that of language when it comes to claim one's position or identity. Amitab decides of giving up when after all his diligence he comes to find out that the manuscripts he had to work on were written in Hebrew script. But nothing is difficult if one is determined as he realizes that the Hebrew script was not that difficult to decipher and understand and he goes on to overcome the language barrier while putting the story of the slave under a magnifying glass.

Amitav Ghosh makes a furtive effort to juxtapose the position of the poor and the unprivileged classes of the Egypt with that of the Indian while universalizing the impact poverty has on human minds as when some elders despite his various efforts refuse to believe that India could be as poor as Egypt and he writes "I understand that their relationship with the objects of their everyday lives was never innocent of the knowledge that there were other places, other countries which did not have mud-wall huts and horse-driven ploughs, so that those.... Were insubstantial things" (118).

In an Antique land reveals all about Amitab's stay in Egypt, the cross-cultural encounter in the face of people like Abu-Ali, his landlord, the richest and the most influential man of the village, his encounter with Ustaz Mustafa, Zaghoul Pasha, Ustaz Sabry and his embarrassment while confronting their intimate remarks involving not just his religion but his body as well. He has been exposed to another nation and its inhabitants embracing a faith different from his own and while all of it makes the story an interesting and informative piece of writing but what stands out of amongst everything else is the dedication and an extensive curiosity that he displays in knowing the story of a mere slave and the way he follows the slave's trail from library to library for a time no less than a couple of years.

Amitab is pestered continuously by them with questions like do all Indians worship cows? Do they burn their dead? Is he and his other Indian Hindus uncircumcised? These are the kind of questions that can disturb any sensitive mind and especially the one like that of Amitab a young Indian Hindu who feels like a sacrificial goat trapped amidst its slaughterers but he manages to escape such incidents every time by one or the other means and keeps his pursuit of exploring the never explored alive and the result of which is that the life of a person like Bomma gets a ray of light out of darkness and his chapter is added to the book of life.

Amitav Ghosh thus insists that the only way to leave your mark on history is by writing it down and through the story of Bomma, the slave, he tries to put forward the idea that there is a necessity to invent sufficient methods for reconstructing the more human and individual experiences of those categorized as illiterate or the inconsequential or the marginalized. This is how a marginal identity is reconstructed and this is the aim of the Fourth World literature too.

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